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Piety in Queen Victoria's Reign

by Elizabeth Longford

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PIETY IN QUEEN VICTORIA'S REIGN

Early one morning during the last quarter of Queen Victoria's reign a small boy wriggled his fingers into the stuffing of a chair-seat and pulled out a silver spoon. He was amazed and enchanted. On consideration he regarded his treasure trove as a reward for industry and piety. For the boy had been kneeling against the chair-seat for ten minutes every morning as long as he could remember, during the regular sessions of family prayers which were held before breakfast in this devout Baptist household. My father—for such he was—had noticed one day a tiny hole in the chair cover, through which peeped the stuffing. Industriously he picked away at the hole every morning during prayers until the glorious day when he found the spoon. If not Jerusalem the golden, at least Jerusalem the silver seemed to lie beneath his hand—to be followed by the milk and honey of breakfast, so abundantly blessed on this happy morning.

My father was to become a distinguished ophthalmic surgeon and Unitarian lay preacher. It was he who introduced me to this delightful and historic library. And it was here in this library that I studied the classics which eventually won for me an English Scholarship at Oxford. His eldest grandchild, my daughter Antonia Fraser, also had the privilege of researching here, under the kind and generous guidance of Mr. Tibbutt, for her recently published biography of Oliver Cromwell. So here are already three generations of the same family to whom Dr. Williams's Library has been a true friend. I must take this early opportunity to express our thanks, and best wishes to the Friends of Dr. Williams's Library. At the same time that I thank you all for the additional honour of inviting me to give this lecture, I must warn you not to expect the deep learning which my predecessors—many of them professors—have brought to their tasks. My own thoughts on piety in Queen

Victoria's reign have been mainly gleaned by the wayside, so to speak, while researching on the lives of Queen Victoria and the Duke of Wellington. There are three recent books, however, which I must acknowledge as being in a more specific sense the sources for what follows: Owen Chadwick's tremendous but graceful two-volume work on *The Victorian Church* (1966 and 1970); George Kitson Clark's invaluable *Churchmen and the Condition of England 1832/1885* (1973); and *The Parting of Friends*, David Newsome's moving study of the Wilberforces and Henry Manning (1966).

I must now return to family prayers, for that interesting institution provides as good a vantage point as any from which to make a preliminary reconnaissance of Victorian piety. Through the method of spot-checks, I shall hope to establish, first, how extraordinarily varied was Victorian piety; second, how few traces of it now remain.

Among the great Duke of Wellington's papers is a letter to him from the unmarried heiress, Miss Angela Burdett-Coutts, who ran a large household in a mansion not far from his own at Apsley House, Piccadilly. Miss Angela, as he called her, wanted to know whether she ought to introduce daily family prayers. He replied that it was unnecessary; he did not have them at Apsley House. It was most necessary, however, to go to church regularly on Sundays in order to set an example. He did it himself despite his deafness, though the intense cold inside St. James's, Piccadilly, sometimes kept him away in winter. (He might have added that another menace at St. James's was Lady Georgiana Fane, a lady who, like Miss Angela, hoped to marry him, and had tried lying in wait for him outside the church after early service. Neither succeeded.)

Moving upwards towards Queen Victoria herself, one finds regular Sunday churchgoing in her household (a practice which remained unbroken in the Royal Family until the brief reign of Edward VIII and has since been steadfastly resumed), the rare but carefully prepared-for receiving of Holy Communion, but no family prayers and some doubts in Victoria's

mind about the point of kneeling to say private prayers. As a young mother she had once written to her German half-sister, Princess Feodora of Hohenlohe-Langenburg, to know whether she made her children kneel down for their night prayers or not. Princess Feodora, a devout German Protestant, replied that she found it answered better just to make them sit up, reverently, in bed.

Moving again to another great house, Hatfield, seat of the Marquises of Salisbury, one finds quite a different story. Family prayers were held every morning before breakfast and every evening after tea in a private chapel close to the great hall. All the family attended and all the servants too. My husband and I were guests of the present Marquis's grandfather in about 1932. Family prayers had in no way abated. I was astonished to observe that the sexes were strictly segregated—a phenomenon I was not to see repeated until I attended a Roman Catholic church in the Irish countryside. I know now, however, that segregation of the sexes was also introduced in some of the crowded Protestant churches in late Victorian days. Apart from Hatfield, I have only personally come across one other example of family prayers continuing into my own day. This was in the home of my father's sister, a Baptist of Northamptonshire. My brother and I, aged eight and nine, found it an unnerving experience when we stayed there alone in 1915. We were both required to recite a verse from the Bible which we had learnt the night before. My performance was glib, but John broke down. He was then asked instead to recite the Lord's Prayer. This he did, but in his agitation forgot to say 'Amen'. A long bewildering silence ensued, for piety forbade any move until the word 'Amen' had been duly said. Our morale was at a low ebb when our uncle solemnly announced the death of a cousin at the Front. We both burst into hysterical giggles. Our uncle saved the situation by breaking into extempore prayer. I might add that family prayers, or even the saying of grace, were unknown in our Unitarian household; perhaps because my father had

married Katherine Chamberlain of Birmingham, a member of the Unitarian clan which even during the Victorian age practised religious reserve and abhorred most outward signs of piety.

It is now necessary to go back a full century from the date of my visit to Hatfield, to a time in the early 1830s when a great and altogether beneficial change was coming over the Church of England. By the year of Queen Victoria's Accession, the hard drinking, fox-hunting, eighteenth century type of parson was disappearing while Victorian piety in the best sense was gathering force. The actual watershed, says Dr Kitson Clark, came in 1850 and was partly due to the work of Charles James Blomfield, Bishop of Chester and later of London. From 1850 to 1870, the Church of England enjoyed twenty years of high thinking and not too plain living. 'This is in fact the period of the high rectory culture of Victorian England', writes Dr Clark, 'when strenuous piety could often be combined with reasonable comfort.' Most of the clergy resided in their livings and many had an adequate income and displayed their 'strenuous piety' in the form of vigorous parish work, including a 'Wife's Society', coal and clothing clubs, a Medical Club, Loan and Blanket Fund, etc., etc.

In order not to take too sour a view of Victorian piety when it appears in less attractive forms, one should perhaps look back at the old-type clergy of George III's and George IV's reigns. In his unregenerate days, even Blomfield had been a pluralist, a Justice of the Peace, a Commissioner of Turnpikes and Commissioner for the Property Tax. He feared these offices might interfere with—his Greek studies. His parish came a good third to his work in the county and the classics. Among other clergy in his Chester diocese, which he thereafter reformed, he found an urban postmaster, a busy commercial agent and the would-be mayor of Macclesfield. In my researches on Wellington I was surprised to find how often the Duke, as Lord-Lieutenant of Hampshire, got involved in rows because he would not appoint clergy to be J.P.s—a practice he

totally condemned, though it did not finally die out until after 1873. On one occasion when the candidates were scarce, he preferred to nominate an Anglo-Indian—‘a gentleman of colour’—rather than involve some clergyman in Hampshire county politics.

The time has now arrived to look at the phenomena which today would be regarded as manifestations of piety in its unique Victorian form. Incidentally, I am using the Oxford Dictionary’s definition of piety, namely, habitual reverence and obedience to God; godliness, devoutness, religiousness. I also note that Professor Chadwick frequently uses the word ‘devotion’ as a synonym for piety.

With all its pristine verve, then, piety broke out in two opposite sectors of the Church of England, the low and high, the evangelicals and the Puseyites. No more lively and often touching account of evangelical piety can be found than in Newsome’s *Parting of Friends*. Four brilliant young men, three of them sons of the great William Wilberforce of Anti-slave Trade fame, and the fourth an Anglican named Henry Manning who married Wilberforce’s daughter, all began as strong evangelicals, the young Wilberforces having been born into the most celebrated family of evangelical ‘saints’, as they were called, in Britain. Later on the four friends parted, because of the religious controversies of the day, Samuel Wilberforce—Soapy Sam—becoming an Anglican bishop, his two brothers Robert and Henry going over to Rome, and Manning eventually becoming a cardinal.

From their early letters we can gather exactly what it was to be a pious evangelical. Possibly the surest test of piety was earnestness in prayer and sometimes, it must be admitted, lengthiness. Samuel Wilberforce was once told by his father about an accomplished evangelical teacher named Martin Madan whom he often listened to as a young man. When, in later years, Madan fell from grace, old Wilberforce asked a common friend if he had ever noticed anything during Madan’s pious years to foreshadow his fall. Yes, replied the friend, when

he and Madan were travelling together through Yorkshire and stopping at little inns, the partitions between their bedrooms were so thin that he could hear what a very short time Mr. Madan gave to prayer. He had indeed expressed to Mr. Madan his surprise that he was able with such short spiritual exercises to maintain the religious life of his soul.

This evaluation of prayer by mileage later degenerated into interminable extempore dialogues with God, conducted in the pulpit before a languishing audience. Nonconformist congregations were often impelled to introduce printed forms of Service into their chapels, by way of curbing their preachers' fatal facility. But in 1850 Samuel Wilberforce was still measuring piety by minutes. He was scandalised by a priest's galloping performance at High Mass in Strasbourg cathedral. 'I was following him in the Missal', wrote Samuel, 'and could scarcely read to myself an $\frac{1}{8}$ of the prayers before he had done it.'

Again, the true evangelical could always be recognised by the company he kept. This indeed was an acid test, and sometimes set the young Wilberforces' teeth on edge. Their father had expounded the principle to Samuel in a splendid letter of which the gist was that he should make the acquaintance of good and useful men, avoiding those from whom defilement might be contracted. He concluded 'O my dearest Boy, *Aim high*. Don't be satisfied with being hopeful . . . Strive to be a Christian, in the highest sense of that term.' While at Oriel College, Oxford, Robert Wilberforce received a letter from his sister Lizzie putting the same point more lightly:

'My dear Robert, I know you will forgive me if I say that I think Oxford has had this bad effect upon you, that it has led you too much to bury religion in your own bosom, not enough to see the distinction between the Christian and the amiable and good man of the world, that their grand design in life should be different . . . I sometimes wish you and dear Sam, where there is real piety, were more disposed to get over manner and not as I fear to prefer a man for his

elegance and gentlemanlike manners to one who has more piety’

The trouble was that neither Robert nor Samuel liked the typical young evangelicals they met at Oxford, particularly as the deeper their piety the lower they seemed to be by birth. Samuel wrote sadly to his father.:

‘At Oriel there are not perhaps above two or three whom you can call really religious, a great proportion of moral, hopeful, *good sort* of men, and on the other hand men occasionally perhaps actually immoral Would you have me not become at all *acquainted* with any of these not positively good or merely to just know them and thus keeping within the laws of civility? Again the men generally who are most religious belong (I believe) to Wadham or St. Edmund’s Hall and are very very low by birth and equally vulgar in manners, feelings and conduct. Would you have me form acquaintance with these?’

Puseyites were soon generally admitted to have two advantages over evangelicals: they had more learning—‘And they are gentlemen’.

Besides undesirable acquaintances, a truly pious young man must try to avoid all distractions. These could vary from the slightly injurious, like good food, to the highly noxious, like theatres, dancing and singing, other than sacred songs. William Wilberforce was once asked whether a young girl should be allowed to sing at a party. This tightrope question drew from William many pages of argument in reply, beginning with the reflection that he saw nothing actually ‘*criminal*’ in singing songs whose words contained no sentiments improper for a Christian to utter, but concluding solemnly ‘I confess I think the songs to be sung should be selected with some caution’

Along with the need to avoid distractions went the call to the pious for positive self-denial. A human story is told by Newsome of Samuel and a friend deciding to perform small, useful acts of self-denial, and to keep one another up to the mark. It worked, until they both attended the same grand

dinner-party. Delicacy after delicacy had to be declined, each increasingly irritated by the other's watchfulness. Suddenly it became too much. They caught each other's eye and succumbed—to turbot and lobster sauce.

If parties of all kinds were a constant distraction, deathbed scenes were conversely a standing invitation to display piety, in the sense of obedience to Divine Will. The Victorians often behaved with admirable resignation. The *Parting of Friends* contains a vivid account of Robert's parting from his wife Agnes who was about to die after childbirth. Though not perhaps to modern taste, the sentiments expressed on both sides are pathetic pearls of piety.

'Kneeling by her bedside I said, "My dear one, we don't part in sorrow and our meeting will be in joy". "Yes", she said, "I am very happy—all my trust is in my Saviour and I hope soon to be with Him." I quoted a line of the *Christian Year* [Keble's religious verses] "For one short life we part" . . . She went on and said "I don't wish to stay, I had rather depart, I don't wish to stay", she repeated turning to me, "even to be with you". . . . God enabled me to answer (I hope from the bottom of my heart) "I would not keep you"'

Victorian piety made terrifying demands on the bereaved. It is impossible to feel that all were sincere in their submission to the will of God. Some temporarily rebelled like the Queen herself; others, like Joseph Chamberlain who lost two wives in childbirth, lost their faith. To men of heroic piety, however, like Robert Wilberforce and Henry Manning who also lost his wife, obedience was unquestionably a comfort. The mourner's grief remained, but his fear and resentment at death were assuaged. The frequency of occasions for mourning is illustrated by the sequel to the loss of Agnes. Robert's sister Emily gave birth to a stillborn child the year after Agnes died. Next year Emily gave birth again, to a baby girl, whom she called after her late sister-in-law. Little Agnes died on the day she was born.

Anyone who saw the remarkable exhibition at Brighton a few years ago on 'The Victorian Way of Death', must have been at first appalled. The widow's dreadful weeds, the dying infant's last mawkish homily to its weeping parents, the hideous memorials—all are calculated to make Victorian piety unattractive to a later age which prefers, like Ophelia, to turn grief and death into 'prettiness'. On reflection, however, one felt that even the morbid piety displayed at Brighton was perhaps a necessary protection against an enemy who struck so often and so hard.

We now come to the last and most penetrating ingredient of evangelical piety. It was the need to proselytise, to convert, to lead others, through their own demonstrative joy in Jesus, to the way of salvation. In a cool form we see it expressed by Robert Wilberforce when he first met the so-called 'high-and-dry' churchman, John Keble. Keble seemed to Robert to have strange reticences about religion. For example, he had been reading a pious work entitled *Serious Call* and when interrupted, 'instead of leaving it about to do people good', he hid it in a drawer. Robert was to discover that Keble's highness and dryness sprang not from spiritual pride but humility, a reluctance to impose himself on others. We shall soon be seeing another example of this conflict between these two equally excellent human attitudes—open evangelism and sensitive diffidence. Both were products of the new piety which was sweeping the Church of England, usually to its own lasting benefit; but sometimes to the advantage of Rome and at other times of nonconformity. It depended on whether the restless seeker after truth turned eastwards towards an altar, candles and a crucifix; or towards the church door, and out into the street where stood the square, unadorned, gaslit chapel, with its plain holy table.

To those who remained in the Anglican communion, like Samuel Wilberforce, professionalism in piety was *de rigueur*. Extempore praying by the laity, for instance, in the presence of professional divines was just not on. One of Samuel's

parishoners, having asked his pastor to pray with him and his wife, suddenly launched into extempore prayer before the irate Samuel could get a word in edgeways. Then his wife began—and with far too much of the ‘God-I-thank-thee’ type of prayer for Samuel’s taste. As soon as Samuel had risen from his knees he spoke out. ‘I told them very plainly’, he recorded in his diary, ‘my entire disapprobation of things of the sort—that I disliked it—that I never could allow of another leading when the Minister of God was present etc. etc. etc. She apologised and he took the rebuke humbly.’ Soapy Sam could be suitably abrasive towards the lower orders.

A few words about the special piety of the High Church are necessary, before we move on to consider the hindrances to Victorian piety in general. Ritualism and ceremonial were outstanding aids to piety among the Puseyites. They believed in promoting reverence by the eye as well as the word. With their great learning, they studied the history of the Church, reintroducing practices which, though abominated by their opponents, were undeniably in the Prayer Book. Queen Victoria was prepared at one time to suppress ritualistic pieties by strong-arm methods: ‘the archbishop should have the *power* given him by *Parliament*’, she wrote to her great friend Dean Stanley, ‘to *stop all* these ritualistic practices, dressings, bowings, etc., and everything of that kind, and *above all, all attempts at confession.*’ The move towards more beautiful church music was probably the only aspect of high church piety with which Victoria and Albert had any sympathy. They were both intensely musical and Albert composed many religious pieces.

It is now time to enter the last area of our survey: the obstacles and hindrances to piety which had to be faced. Practices which were regarded as the respective excesses of each wing, high and low, undoubtedly put off the silent majority. The sight of a clergyman, for instance, who was a member of an Anglican brotherhood, striding down the street in a habit, provoked intense irritation. One critic wondered if

he wore a coat and trousers underneath. More ferocious, because reflecting a genuine popular reaction, were the criticisms of extreme evangelicism. It was all very well to scatter tracts broadcast in buses, pleasure-boats and hedgerows; to hand them out among the Crystal Palace crowd; to proffer them to riders on horseback on the end of pointed sticks and to cabbies with their fare. But could one not even be safe in a first-class railway carriage? There is an entertaining account by the young Margot Tennant (later Lady Oxford and Asquith) of an accidental meeting with the Salvation Army leader, General Booth. Margot had only just caught the train by flinging herself into the nearest carriage, in which she found ensconced a handsome old gentleman. She apologised for her invasion. He said there was no need to apologise. But why was it so important not to miss the train?

Margot: 'I am going to try horses What are you going to do?'

Old Gentleman: 'I am going to save souls.'

M: 'You are sanguine.'

O.G.: 'Don't you believe in saving souls?'

Margot secretly thought it pretentious but replied:

M: 'I know what you mean . . . but I think there is something morally vulgar in trying to get too familiar with men's souls.'

O.G. (indignantly): 'When you are dealing with the drunken and the depraved, you must not be morally aristocratic. You know nothing of real life'

The handsome old gentleman then spoke with great eloquence about the seamy side of life, ending with the challenge—

O.G.: 'What do *you* know about drink? You have probably never seen drunkenness in your life.'

M: 'Oh, haven't I just! I am Scotch!'

But Booth had the last word. He made Margot kneel down with him on the carriage floor while he prayed aloud for all lost souls.

Then there were the Sabbatarians. According to Dr. Chadwick, an M.P. named Sir Andrew Agnew was originally responsible for making the Sabbatarians disliked. Having helped to found the Society for Promoting Due Observance of the Lord's Day in 1831, Sir Andrew introduced a bill two years later for making illegal on a Sunday not only gaming, betting, shooting, etc. but 'any pastime of public indecorum, inconvenience or nuisance', including public lectures or meetings, the sale of a drink in a hotel except to travellers, the hiring of carriages except by clergy or doctors, the opening of turnpikes or lock-gates, the sailing of vessels, the driving of buses. Needless to say the bill was lost; but by only six votes, and it had been supported by the great Lord Shaftesbury (then Lord Ashley). A disgusted opponent had called it a bill to promote cant, and the majority agreed with him. For Sabbatarianism dealt hardly with the poor, as Joe Chamberlain used to say, and affected the rich hardly at all. A poor woman could not take out her Sunday joint to a public bake-house, while the rich woman's cook worked as usual. Sunday excursion trains provided a particularly dramatic battle-ground. Collisions which happened on the Sabbath were eagerly noted, forming the theme for sermons on cheap excursions to hell. By 1848 the Queen herself was forced to begin the last lap of her railway journey from Balmoral before dawn on a Sunday, in order to avoid infringing the stringent rule. 'In my opinion it is overdone,' she wrote in her Journal. 'We were . . . called at 5—rather hard after a long day yesterday.' For the poor it was harder still, Sunday being the only day in the week when they could hope for recreation. There was a near-riot when the government attempted to veto the popular Sunday concerts held round bandstands in Hyde Park. The Sabbatarians were defeated.

During my youth there were relics of Sabbatarianism at our holiday house in Kent. In deference to the villagers' religious susceptibilities, we children were not allowed to play tennis on Sunday but only croquet, since the croquet balls, though they made a louder click, were unlikely to soar above the garden hedge and become visible from the road. The cottagers' walls

were often adorned with tracts. I still remember a Sunday when my brother and myself were invited to tea by our two daily maids, sisters named Nellie and Mabel. Presiding, as it were, over their tea-table was a large notice: 'Jesus is the Unseen Guest at every meal, the Silent Listener to every conversation.' It gave us an eerie feeling.

Going back fifty or sixty years, a strict evangelical like Lord Shaftesbury scarcely read any book but the Bible even on weekdays. He put up a successful fight to get Bibles into the Crystal Palace in 1851. The exhibition was forced to keep shut on Sundays, though the anti-Sabbatarians argued that to leave the working-classes with nothing to do but drink gin, was scarcely pious or even humane. The evangelicals were also successful on insisting on fig-leaves for the nude statuary when the Exhibition was moved to Sydenham in 1854, to the ribald amusement of *Punch*. Thus prudery was added to puritanism at a sign of religious devotion, at least in the minds of those who disliked it. It is this unattractive side of Victorian piety which has led a distinguished modern historian, Professor J. H. Plumb, to attack the whole Victorian moral ethos. 'Men and women were destroyed by a moral code which was either too strict for them to keep, or which, if they did keep it, made them neurotic', he writes in his stimulating book of essays, *In the Light of History* (1972). He gives the examples of George Eliot, Dickens and Ruskin. Man was accountable in Victorian morality, says Plumb, for every moment he spent on earth and sin could be so wide as to include reading fiction or, if one was a young girl, walking out alone unchaperoned.

Victorian piety could undoubtedly be intolerant, obtrusive and even cruel, especially to children. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether the 'permissive society' of today is the cause of less unhappiness to adults than the 'pious society' of yesterday.

More dangerous in the long run to Victorian piety than its own excesses were certain inevitable developments of the age. Nineteenth century researches on Bible history, geology and

evolution unsettled many pious members of the Church, and gave rise to the great controversies summed up under the headings of 'The Higher Criticism' and 'Science and Religion'. Of course many Christians reacted to the challenge with unshaken faith. The old Duke of Wellington saw no fundamental incompatibility between the fossilised remains of a clearly earlier creation and the story of the Creation in Genesis. Nor did my father, half a century later. But Tennyson was inclined to rate 'honest doubt' above 'simple piety' while Bishop Colenso, a writer of textbooks on arithmetic and a somewhat superficial philosopher, made certain calculations from the Old Testament which reduced the idea of Biblical inspiration to a farce. Could one believe that the voice of a single lector had been heard by two million people, or that six men had 2,748 sons, or that every priest of Israel ate 88 pigeons a day?

From another quarter came a far more formidable onslaught. Karl Marx effectively labelled religion the 'opium of the people'; his daughter Eleanor, more directly, denounced it as an 'immoral illusion'. Many Unitarians and others whom Dr. Clark calls 'the philanthropic élite', began to be more absorbed by 'the Sanitary principle' than the religious principle. The poor required piped water rather than pipe dreams.

At a time when Women's Rights had become a war-cry, piety was supposed to be one of the methods by which men kept silly ladies in subjection. It has to be admitted that Mrs. Booth of the Salvation Army was one of the few pious leaders who was also a convinced feminist.

Finally, fifty years of religious revival—roughly from 1825 to 1875—had begun to be counter-productive. From 1860 to 1880 agnosticism was spreading into hitherto unaffected areas. Dr. Clark cites the leading men of Oxford and Cambridge as examples: Leslie Stephen, Henry Sidgwick and 'probably' Arnold Toynbee. Jowett of Balliol did not quite escape the virus. 'Although we are in a false position in the church', he wrote to

Florence Nightingale in 1873, 'we should be in a still more false position out of the church.' A few years later Margot Tennant was to ask Dr. Jowett about his sensations when he had recently been at death's door. He replied: 'I felt no rapture . . . no bliss . . . My dear child, you must believe in God in spite of what the clergy tell you'. This was a far cry from 1835 when the second Lady Longford lost her husband and could not feel certain of recognising him again in a future life until after receiving an assurance from Bishop Heber. She had been afraid to believe the same assurance when conveyed in a religious book, 'as the writer was not a clergyman!'

Perhaps I may be allowed to leave the future of piety, symbolically, in the hands of the young Beatrice Potter, who became Beatrice Webb. She lost her faith but kept her piety. 'I must make a faith for myself, and I must work, work, until I have', she wrote in her diary at 16. Beatrice was to make many great things but never a religious faith in the orthodox sense. Notwithstanding this loss she continued to kneel in prayer to the end of her life.